



OHMVR COMMISSION MEETING Pismo Beach, CA

December 12, 2014

STAFF REPORT: Oceano Dunes District

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SUBJECT: Oceano Dunes District Program Overview

Summary

The following provides an overview of the Oceano Dunes District, including areas such as trends in park visitation, visitor services, resource management, education and interpretation, planning, concessions, and facility improvements.

CREATION OF THE PARK

In 1974, the Department of Parks and Recreation (Department) completed a General Development Plan for Pismo State Beach and Pismo Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area (SVRA). (Note – Pismo Dunes SVRA was later re-named Oceano Dunes SVRA.) The State Park and Recreation Commission which authorized the various recreational uses of both parks approved the Plan in 1975.

Park Overview

Oceano Dunes SVRA is located on California's Central Coast in San Luis Obispo County, within the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes complex. The SVRA is bordered on the north by the cities of Grover Beach and Pismo Beach, on the east by the community of Oceano, on the south by Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes National Wildlife Refuge, and on the west by the Pacific Ocean.

Oceano Dunes' topography includes an active dune complex (shifting sand) that is geologically unique and was first documented by the early Spanish explorers on their way up the California coast. The sand that formed these dunes was



carried down to the ocean by rivers and streams, deposited on the beach by ocean currents, and then shaped by the wind into the dunes seen today in a process that is still ongoing.

Archaeological excavations in the area surrounding the park have uncovered artifacts dating back at least 11,000 years ago, allowing archeologists to establish the time frame this area was occupied by Northern Chumash, one of the oldest tribes in California. These areas are protected from disturbance from park visitors but evidence of their presence may be seen in several locations in the dunes in the form of “middens,” which are piles of shells left after the Chumash collected shellfish for food.



The first documentation of motorized vehicles being operated on the beach was a 1906 newspaper article announcing that Ford Motor Company was meeting in Pismo Beach for a rally between California's northern and southern car dealerships. Early photos depict families enjoying the beach and dunes in horse drawn carriages and on bicycles.

Today, the sand dunes' distinctive features provide for a unique recreational opportunity for visitors to participate in motorized recreation on several miles of beach and coastal sand dunes. The SVRA has been a favorite camping and recreation site for families for over 100 years.

General Park Information

The Oceano Dunes District operates Oceano Dunes SVRA, Pismo State Beach, and the Pismo Dunes Natural Preserve. All three units are contiguous with one another.

Oceano Dunes SVRA consists of 3600 acres of sandy beach and coastal dunes. 1500 acres are open to off-highway vehicle (OHV) recreation and camping.

Approximately 2100 acres is closed to OHV recreation, but open to various non-motorized recreational opportunities. Pismo State Beach consists of approximately 1400 acres of sandy beach and coastal dunes that includes approximately 720 acres of the Pismo Dunes Natural Preserve. These areas are delineated by over 22 miles of perimeter fencing requiring constant maintenance and



repair. In 2013 approximately 200,000 feet of perimeter and island fencing was replaced.

In addition to motorized recreation, Oceano Dunes SVRA provides a wide array of other non-motorized recreation opportunities including but not limited to hiking, nature walks, horseback riding, kite surfing, and bird watching. In the south end of the SVRA is the Oso Flaco Lakes area. This area consists of two freshwater lakes on the edge of the dune complex. Visitors to the Oso Flaco area can enjoy a moderate walk along the one-mile Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessible boardwalk, observing wildlife and native plants as the path passes Oso Flaco Lakes area, leading out to the beach. This area is an important stopover for waterfowl traveling along the Pacific Flyway.



Visitation

In 2013, annual attendance at Oceano Dunes SVRA was approximately 1.6 million visitors. With its primitive beach and dune camping, the SVRA is the most popular camping destination in all of State Parks. The park has a 1000 vehicle per night camping limit, and a day use limit of 4300 vehicles. These limits were established through a 1982 Coastal Development Permit and four subsequent Permit Amendments to operate the park in the Coastal Zone.

With over 600,000 visitors in 2013, Pismo State Beach is also a very popular camping destination for OHV enthusiasts. Located close to the Grand and Pier Avenue entrances to the SVRA, Pismo State Beach has two developed campgrounds – Oceano and North Beach – which have a total of 174 developed campsites offering conventional amenities such as picnic tables, restrooms, fire rings, and 40 hook-up sites.



Attendance at the SVRA peaked in 2005 with over 2 million visitors. In each year since 2006 the annual attendance dropped until 2010. 2010 to present the visitation stayed consistent at approximately 1.6 million, and 2014, weather permitting will be similar. Rising fuel costs and other economic factors played a role in the decline, and decreased fuel costs and increasing economy are similarly having a positive effect.

VISITOR SERVICES PROGRAMS

Interpretation and Education

Our Interpretive staff consists of one permanent State Park Interpreter and five seasonal interpretive specialists. The District offers a variety of educational programs which include our traditional Jr. Ranger and Campfire programs. In 2013, 550 children attended the Jr. Ranger programs, while 702 park visitors attended campfire programs.

Jr. Ranger programs are typically held Thursday through Saturday beginning the middle of June through Labor Day weekend. Campfire programs are held intermittently throughout the year on holiday weekends, but consistently on Friday and Saturday evenings beginning the middle of June through Labor Day Weekend.

In addition to traditional interpretive programs, staff created park specific programs that are offered throughout the summer season;

“Roving”, “Walks and Talks” and “Summer Fun Days”. Throughout the District over 7,000 visitors were entertained by just these programs in 2013.



The park offers free tours and school programs for schools, this opportunity is utilized predominantly by San Luis Obispo County schools, but all school classes are welcome.



Tours in the Monarch Butterfly Grove, the Nature Center, and Oceano Lagoon are available. Additionally, park staff conduct programs at schools using a variety of natural and cultural learning tools. Over 14,000 children participated in these educational programs in 2013 and 2014 to date. Of course, the Monarch Butterfly Grove continues to be our most highly visited single attraction our park has to offer. With the assistance of our dedicated Volunteer group, our park staff reached an audience of over 96,000 in 2013.

The Central Coast State Parks Association is a cooperating association that functions both in San Luis Obispo Coast District and the Oceano Dunes District of State Parks.

These docents and volunteers are an integral part of the park's ability to offer tours and educational programs. Although they predominantly conduct the programming at the Monarch Butterfly Grove, Nature Center, and Oceano Lagoon, many of the docents offer specific hikes and programs in the dunes and at Oso Flaco Lake on topics such as the Dunites, Chumash, and Don Gaspar de Portola's expedition.

Our new Visitor Center is in the final stages of contracts and is expected to begin construction in early 2015. Our much-anticipated Visitor Center will provide a new facility to house our exhibits, and interpretive displays, host school groups and other interpretive programs, provide for a new parks store and provide space for our staff to develop and manage District programs.

Public Safety

Public safety is extremely important to the Oceano Dunes District staff. In addition to public safety contacts to ensure safe and responsible operation of vehicles, visitor services staff also respond to medical emergencies providing patient care, handle



various types of law enforcement investigations and respond to assist our local agencies within the community.

Operating a district as complex as Oceano Dunes is similar to managing a small town. Maintaining an effective public safety program requires a significant amount of

effort to maintain legally mandated levels of staff proficiency. Rangers train and rely on other park staff and volunteers to assist in emergency response with traffic control, communication and allied agencies. Maintenance crews also assist with homeless encampment clearing and debris removal.



Within the District are a number of certified instructors who provide training to staff. Oceano Dunes instructors are in high demand because of their high levels of proficiency and experience and many teach at our Department's Ranger academy and provide training to local allied agencies. Training topics include; firearms, defensive tactics, emergency medical responder, off-road driving, drug and alcohol recognition, scenario evaluator, sound testing, ATV safety training, and rescue techniques.

Volunteer Assistance

Volunteers dedicate hundreds of hours to our District and provide a valuable and vital component to our park's public service staff. Our Volunteer staff offer tremendous support by providing District education programs, patrolling our parks and trails, sharing information with our visitors, and assist with public safety and medical operations.

The District has three very active Volunteer groups, each with their own unique objectives and benefits to District operations. The OHV Volunteers are twenty strong and provide assistance within the SVRA; our Mounted Volunteer Program, our equestrian group of thirty five, patrol our trails and beaches, and our CCSPA Volunteers totaling one hundred, provide our educational program support.



The success and achievements of many of the programs offered by our District would not be possible were it not for the dedication of these volunteers—their time and commitment to our Parks and programs.

Aquatic Safety

Surfing, boating, operating personal watercraft, kite boarding, and paddling are some of the recreational watersports available at Oceano Dunes SVRA. Since motorized activity is allowed on the beach, those accessing the water for recreational purposes can park their vehicles and easily unload gear near the water's edge. During our summer season, lifeguards respond to numerous aquatic rescues and medical



calls and make hundreds of aquatic preventative safety contacts. Oceano Dunes continues to develop a successful and respectable aquatic safety program.

As part of our community outreach efforts and a way to bring children and the aquatic environment together, Oceano Dunes supports a Junior Lifeguard program, having completed only our second

year/season. Our first year in 2013 began small with a group of approximately fifteen children ages nine to sixteen. Word of mouth and program enthusiasm brought back those initial participants and increased our attendance to approximately 30 children in 2014. We again expect our program to build and double our participants to approximately 60 children for the summer of 2015. The children continue to be excited for the camaraderie, skills and activities they are involved with as Junior Lifeguards, and the parents of these children have become our strongest supporters of the program, Oceano Dunes and State Parks.



RESOURCE PROGRAM

Habitat Monitoring System

Oceano Dunes SVRA, like all of the SVRAs, conducts annual Habitat Monitoring System (HMS) monitoring that includes surveys of vegetation, shoreline birds, terrestrial birds, and herpetological resources. Surveys are also conducted periodically for small and large mammals. The HMS surveys are vital to understanding the long-term status and trends of sensitive plant and animal populations. In the ten plus years of HMS monitoring, park staff have been able to track the population trends of sensitive plant species like the beach spectacle pod (*Dithyria maritima*) and the surf thistle (*Cirsium rothophilum*). Similarly, the HMS surveys have provided valuable information on the trends of shorebird species that use the beach and estuarine habitats within the park.



This HMS information is vital to effectively managing plant and animal populations while providing for recreational opportunities at the park.

Habitat Conservation Plan

One of the long-term goals for the SVRA is a multi-species Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) to cover all park operations under the State and Federal Endangered Species Acts. This HCP will outline specific management and monitoring activities to address covered species,



including western snowy plover, California least tern, California red-legged frog, tidewater goby, and numerous listed plant species. The

HCP will help guarantee existing recreational programs can continue at the park and could result in additional recreational opportunities during the plover and tern breeding season. The District has made important progress on the HCP in 2014 and is actively engaged with the wildlife agencies in this effort.



Plover and Tern Nesting Program

Each year, from March 1 – September 30, Oceano Dunes SVRA closes approximately 300 acres of the park to provide nesting habitat for the federally listed threatened western



snowy plover and the state and federally listed endangered California least tern. Maintenance crews install over 7 miles of fencing for the seasonal enclosure. This



fence is buried 18 inches into the sand and constructed of two layers reaching over six feet in height to meet permit requirements and assist with predator management. A large complement of

environmental scientists and seasonal staff monitor the area on a daily basis to track nesting activity, predator activity, nest success, and chick survival. The nesting area is fenced with a 6-foot tall predator proof fence that is maintained throughout the nesting season. Resource staff implement a number of habitat enhancement efforts to improve nesting conditions for the plover and tern including; placing large woody debris, placing wood chips, adding surf cast kelp (wrack), installing native plants, and enhancing food resources in the nesting area on the sand. Resource staff monitor nesting behavior seven days per week and during most daylight hours. Chicks are given a unique color band combination to allow monitors to track the chicks. One critical piece of information that is collected at Oceano Dunes SVRA is a count of the chicks reaching fledge age, the age at which the chicks can live independently.



From 2005 - 2014, Oceano Dunes SVRA averaged 40 breeding pairs of California least tern. During this same time period, Oceano Dunes SVRA produced an average of 46 fledged chicks per year. The park produced more than one fledged chick per breeding pair, providing for strong population growth of this endangered species. In addition, over this same time period the park produced more than half of all the California least tern chicks to reach fledge age in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties.



Restoration Program

Every year, Oceano Dunes SVRA implements a restoration project to control sand movement and maintain the habitat values of the vegetation islands located within or adjacent to the open riding area of the park. Over time, these islands become inundated with shifting sands. Since 2004, the park has restored approximately 170 acres of actively eroding sand dune. Staff manage an active greenhouse operation that produces an excess of 20,000 plants per year to plant in restoration areas.



Some recent restoration efforts include large areas at Pavilion Hill and within the Phillips 66 Buffer Area. These projects installed locally collected dune vegetation in areas that were being inundated with sand and non-native vegetation. Other restoration projects have been completed at the Boy Scout, Maidenform, Table Top, and Pipeline vegetation islands. Monitoring plots are being established in these restoration areas to demonstrate the success of these projects and the recovery of these restored

areas to support the full complement of native plant species. Integral to this program are maintenance crews and heavy equipment to maintain and install fencing, and distribute straw for sand stabilization.

The restoration techniques developed at Oceano Dunes SVRA have been adopted at other sites within the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dune System and at other coastal dune systems in the state.



Invasive Exotic Weed Control Program

The single greatest threat to habitat viability at Oceano Dunes SVRA is the spread of invasive exotic vegetation throughout the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dune System. Two invasive exotic grasses (veldt grass and European beachgrass) are widespread and are continuing to impact habitats throughout the SVRA. These two weeds aggressively displace native plant species in foredune, dune scrub, and dune swale habitats. These invasive grasses are widespread throughout the dune system. Staff has been working with partner agencies and adjacent public landowners to control large infestations of invasive exotic species throughout the dune complex. One recent effort focused on a new weed (Russian wheat) which is only found in Pismo State Beach and Oceano Dunes SVRA. Controlling the spread of this new weed will preserve habitat values in the park and prevent the spread of this aggressive plant into other nearby public and private dune habitats. Weed control activities include herbicide application, hand removal of target weeds, and prescribed fire.



The restoration and weed control programs at the park are vital to the long-term preservation of habitats and the unique flora and fauna in the park. Restoration activities can help reduce the spread of invasive exotic species and invasive control efforts can help restoration projects succeed.



Water Quality

Water quality has been identified as a significant issue in Oso Flaco Lake. It should be noted that the water quality issues at Oso Flaco are not a result of OHV recreation. Oso Flaco Lake, and many other water bodies in the state, is subject to upstream uses that can degrade water quality.



The Lake drains a small watershed that is dominated by irrigated agriculture. Monitoring by the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board had demonstrated significant issues with bacteria levels, nutrient levels, and pesticides. The

Lake is listed as an impaired water body and is subject to a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) regulation dealing with a host of water quality impairments.

The District continues to partner with local efforts including the Coastal San Luis Resource Conservation District and local landowners to identify threats to water quality and options to improve conditions in the Lake.

Fish Surveys

Park staff conducts fisheries surveys of Arroyo Grande Creek on a quarterly basis to document trends of native fish populations. These surveys have recorded important trends in species like the federally listed endangered tidewater goby and the threatened steelhead trout. These surveys have also documented declines in fish populations associated with drought conditions and upstream water uses.



Air Quality

In November 2011, the Air Pollution Control District (APCD) Board of Directors implemented local rule 1001, a Fugitive Dust Rule that outlines steps that must be taken by State Parks to reduce the PM-10 emissions. The Rule includes monitoring requirements, a timeline for implementation of projects, and other reporting requirements.



May of 2012 the Monitoring sites were approved by APCD and State Parks submitted the Master Coastal Development plan to the Coastal Commission in November of that year. This allowed for much needed assessment monitoring and testing by the Desert

Research Institute in 2013 – July 2013 the Particulate Matter Reduction Plan was approved by the APCD. The first particulate reduction projects were installed from April - June 2014, the information gained during that time was instrumental in preparing the projects that will be installed for March - June of 2015.

PLANNING

Marketing and Outreach

In fall of 2010, the District began developing marketing strategies and an implementation plan for the Oceano Dunes District. The District identified the need to increase public knowledge of the operations and functions of the parks, as well as change perception and behavior of the park visitors.



In October 2010, the SVRA entered into a collaborative project with the San Luis Obispo County Business Improvement District (CBID) to shoot virtual tour photography in the parks that would be used both on the CBID and State Parks OHMVR Division website. The project was completed in May 2011 and the virtual tour is currently available to experience on the OHMVR Division website. The tour is an exciting historical look at the parks, and provides a wonderful opportunity to share this unique resource with the visitors, legislature, local investors, businesses, and tourists. The District continues this collaboration today through the Stewardship Traveler Program offering park experiences where the visitor can be educated, be a steward and benefit local parks and non-profit organizations.

The most aggressive undertaking thus far has been the creation of the Mobile Marketing Program. It consists of a 24-foot marketing trailer that houses five exhibits. Through the strategic planning sessions, park staff determined four topical areas of messaging, around which the exhibits were created; Respect the Land, Natural Hazards, Laws and Safety, and Rider/Driver Safety. Each of these exhibits includes eye-catching photography and visual effects, interactive media messaging and video, and strategic information and messaging that furthers the parks' marketing strategies and goals.





The Mobile Marketing Project was a District-wide collaboration of efforts, and has received many accolades from businesses and OHV communities. The concept of building a framework for hands-on interactive media that could be updated through video and audio edits proved to be very successful in 2014 when we were able to create updated and issue specific messaging for minimal cost; and literally plug it into the existing framework. With the 150th Anniversary of State Parks

being celebrated in 2014 we took on an elaborate challenge to collaborate with the San Luis Obispo Coastal District of State Parks to create exhibits for the San Luis Obispo County Mid-State Fair. Oceano Dunes District has participated in the fair each year since building our outreach exhibits, this year the District set a phenomenal precedence in our ability to take our existing concepts and expand them to encompass our neighboring Parks Districts facilities. The collaboration yielded seven additional exhibits and programs that truly told the significant and unique story of our San Luis Obispo County State Parks. Nearly 25,500 people enjoyed the 150th anniversary exhibits at the Mid-State Fair in Paso Robles during July 2014, and nearly 7500 visitors were entertained by a smaller version of the exhibits at the Sand Sport Super Show, in Costa Mesa in September 2014. The succinct messaging, interactive media, and the ability to adapt and update the messaging with minimal additional effort or cost are part of the longevity of the Program. Two key partners, Friends of Oceano Dunes and Central Coast State parks Association helped create video, photography, props, and donations for the Mobile Marketing exhibits.



Future marketing projects in the development stages include updating the Safety Education Center, additions to the Guadalupe Nipomo Dunes phone Application, the creation of Self-Guided Tour Brochures and MP-3 audio tours that will highlight the natural, cultural, and historic locations and tales of the Oceano Dunes and Pismo State Beach. These tours will also be available on the Oceano Dunes website.

Concessions

The District administers 10 concession contracts: Fin's Restaurant and Pismo State Beach Golf Course; five OHV rental contracts; a mobile sewer pump-off contract; a dune tour contract; an RV camping trailer rental contract; and, a beach towing contract. Each



concession operation provides very popular services to the visiting public. Rent to the state in 2014 for the concession contracts totaled nearly \$700,000. Gross receipts for the concession operations in the parks totaled over \$7million.

Special Projects

Grover Beach Lodge and Conference Center

State Parks entered into a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA) with the City of Grover Beach to build a lodge and conference facility on state owned property within Pismo State Beach adjacent to one of the main motorized access points to the operational area of Oceano Dunes SVRA. A 1982 amendment to the Pismo State Beach/Pismo Dunes SVRA General Development Plan authorized the project and PRC 5003.02.1 authorized an Operating Agreement or JPA between the



state and the city. A concession contract to build the lodge and conference facility was awarded to Pacifica Companies in 2010. The state (OHV Trust Fund) will receive a share of the concession monthly rent and a share of the monthly Transient Occupancy Tax revenue once the lodge and conference facility commences operation.

An overview and update on this project was presented to the commission in February of 2014. The project continues to progress, in March of this year the Coastal Development Permit (CDP) was approved by the Grover Beach City Council. There is a Grant of Easement on this property between the State and Pacific Crossings for fiber optic lines coming in from Japan and going out to South America. Pacific Crossings brought some concerns about the location of their vault within the Lodge project; those details are being worked out through surveys and re-alignment of the lodge entry off of West Grand Avenue. The JA is in the process of applying for the CDP from the City of Pismo Beach for the improvements to the Pismo State Beach Northbeach Campground Dump Station project which will meet the requirement for the developer to re-locate the Le Sage Dump Station currently serving the Oceano Dunes SVRA visitors.

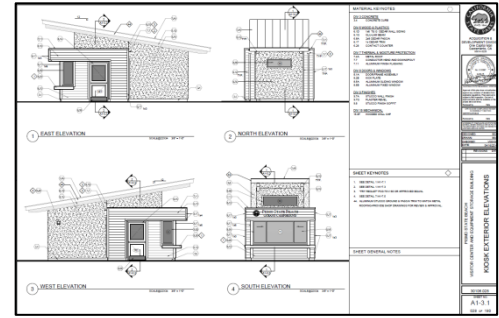
Subsequently the City of Grover Beach will soon begin their project to build improvements to West Grand Avenue which aligns with the Lodge property and will eventually provide congruent pathway, trail and sidewalk improvements to compliment the Lodge and Conference Center Project.

Oceano Dunes District Visitor Center – Equipment Storage Building

The new Visitor Center which will be located at Pismo State Beach Oceano Campground is set to begin construction in March of 2015. The RFP has completed the bidding cycle and is being processed. This project will cause disruption to the Oceano Campground for the majority of 2015. The campground will close prior to the construction start date; the visitor serving amenities will be the first priorities with the

relocation and construction of the new kiosk and adjacent entry to the hook-up section of the campground. There will be a total loss of one campsite in the hook-up section with the camp host site being relocated and developed nearer the new entrance.

The new equipment storage building and the visitor center will be constructed simultaneously, with the expectation that the visitor center will be the last to be finalized as it actually encompasses three individual buildings and significantly more detail. We do not have completion date, however the campground will be brought back into service when it is safe to do so.



Pismo State Beach Campgrounds

The Northbeach and Oceano Campgrounds are progressing through a series of ADA improvements. The campsite adjustments were completed last year and the restroom parking and improvements will be done in 2015. The two restrooms in the tent portion of Oceano Campground are original and scheduled for replacement. Staff have met with the ADA team and Service Center, plans and financing are currently being discussed.

Oso Flaco Lake

Plans have been completed for improvements to the Oso Flaco Lake parking facility and public access causeway to better accommodate general public parking needs, ADA needs and public access to the pedestrian bridge over Oso Flaco Lake and the one-mile long beach boardwalk. These plans include a shade ramada with picnic tables in the parking, away from the windier areas for school groups to meet, staff to provide programs and park visitors to enjoy. The plans also encompass the much needed watershed improvements between adjoining property and the lake.



Special Events & Filming

Pismo State Beach and Oceano Dunes SVRA offer a unique diversity of recreational opportunities. These opportunities bring a consistently increasing number of special event and filming requests; it also brings the opportunity for a unique set of businesses that operate as concessions or through a permit in the park, and contribute significantly to the local economy.

Special events vary from simple family reunions, weddings, or corporate dinner bonfires to kite-boarding expositions, the notorious Huckfest and now annual Copa Cabana Beach Soccer Tournament. Recent filming in the park encompasses vehicle



commercials, fashion shoots, music videos, reality TV, and mini-series episodes. State Parks collaborates with Visit California and the California Travel and Tourism Commission in an effort to keep filming in California to benefit the local economies. State Parks requires only cost recovery and minimal charges to film productions as part of the draw to stay in California; the larger benefit goes to the communities surrounding

State Parks when those productions utilize State Parks and stay in our local hotels, feed their crews in our restaurants and hire a wide variety of local service businesses. Thus far in 2014 the Oceano Dunes District has produced approximately ninety special events and over twenty film shoots. Pismo State Beach and Oceano Dunes truly offer unique recreational experiences and opportunities that are intrinsic to the local economy, history and treasured quality of life.

